

## A VISIT TO AUDUBON'S BIRTHPLACE.

BY O. WIDMANN.

ON THE afternoon of February 26, 1897, I left New Orleans on the East Louisiana R. R. bound for Mandeville, St. Tammany Co., La.

In a straight line Mandeville is only twenty-five miles due north of New Orleans, on the opposite side of Lake Pontchartrain, but by rail the distance is nearly twice as great. The road follows the lake shore through salt water marshes to a point where the lake is only five miles wide, which it crosses on a trestle to the north shore. From there it goes through pine flats north to Pearl River and thence west to the little town of Mandeville, a fashionable bathing place and a frequented summer resort for the inhabitants of the Crescent City. In summer a steamboat line connects the two places, with Milneburg, a suburb of New Orleans, as the starting point.

On the day I left New Orleans the gardens were full of flowers, and in the outskirts a variety of wild flowers were in bloom. Willows and cypresses were covered with young green, and sycamores, sweet gum and others were opening their leaf-buds. On the Mississippi River hundreds of Gulls, Herring and Ring-billed, mostly the latter, were flying up and down and among the numerous ships in the harbor. In the region of the stockyards and abattoirs groups of Black and Turkey Vultures were alighting at the water's edge or soaring in the air above. Looking over the vast cane fields on the other side of the river a faint cloud of White-bellied Swallows could be seen melting into the gray of the horizon.

In the outskirts, a troop of about a hundred Cowbirds was attending a herd of cattle, resting under a huge oak tree, and on the close-cut sward of a meadow an equally large number of Pipits were busily engaged in gathering the necessary means of sustenance for their slender little bodies. Audubon and others were right in surnaming him *ludovicianus*; he is one of the most conspicuous winter birds of Louisiana.

In the marsh a number of Hawks were seen from the car win-

dow. An old Bald Eagle was sitting fearlessly in a tree not far from the train; several Marsh and Sparrow Hawks, and a Rough-legged Hawk, chasing a Marsh Hawk. On the lake only a few Cormorants and Gulls were seen, and long before the train had reached its destination night's lowering shroud excluded farther observation.

The bathing season opens only on the first of May, and at the time of my visit Mandeville presented a picture of grateful tranquillity. The long row of villas fronting the lake looked as if entirely deserted by man. The lawns, the shrubs and trees were occupied by a set of tenants, who take them only for the winter and pay no rent. Yellow-rumped Warblers, White-throated and Chipping Sparrows were the most conspicuous of these winter sojourners but a closer inspection revealed the presence of a score of temporary frequenters of these quiet retreats. The streets, where the stores and dwellings of the stationary population are, are wide and lawn-like; roaming domestic animals keep down all superfluous vegetation with the exception of a few palmettoes, young pines and an occasional blackberry bush. We walk on a green, soft carpet of grass, beset with innumerable bluets (*Houstonia cærulea*). Cardinals, Mockingbirds, Carolina and Bewick's Wrens are in the gardens and on the bird-house sits the Martin with his dear old warble of joy. The owner of the place tells me that the first came February 14, which is not early for southern Louisiana, as in other years they have been known to return from one to two weeks earlier.

Artesian wells furnish the town with an abundance of good water, which runs in rivulets through the streets toward the lake.

On a vacant lot, well within town, a troop of 35 to 40 Meadow-larks is sporting fearlessly and in good cheer; some are singing, others feeding, all seem quite at home in this little town and well pleased with their Louisianian winter quarters. From the thickety border of a slough or bayou, which runs through town, comes the song of the Maryland Yellow-throat and the feline alarm of the Catbird. A Thrasher lights on a garden fence and four female Towhees are hopping in the street, while from the brush comes the warning note of the male.

On a stately water oak, which is now putting forth its catkins

a flock of Bronzed Grackles alights. They sit still for a minute, scanning the surroundings, and then come down into the fenced garden lot to feed. They are mostly males, winter visitants from the North. They go in flocks from place to place and to the common roost at night. The single Grackles which we meet in town are not the Bronzed, but of a different kind with many-colored blotches on their back and a slight difference in the voice. In the early morning, before the hordes of Bronzed Grackles have reached the town from their roosting quarters in the distant marsh, the resident Purple Grackle, which spends the night in trees in town, is in undisputed possession of its breakfast table in the streets.

March 1 found me on the road leading from Mandeville to Fontainebleau, the plantation where Audubon was born May 4, 1780, while his parents were the guests of Marquis de Mandeville Marigny, who lived here in great style, the owner of 500 slaves, mainly employed in the cultivation of sugar cane.

It is only two miles over a good road and the early morning is nice and cool and pleasant for a walk. The Martin is the first to greet us as we leave the hotel at 6 A. M., but there is bird-life everywhere. From the neighboring yards comes the song of the Carolina and Bewick's Wren. In the magnolias which shade the garden are Ruby-crowned Kinglets with their betraying *terek*, and White-throated Sparrows are hopping over the flower beds as thickly as English Sparrows in big cities. The long double row of live and water oaks, which shade the drive along the lake, is alive with Yellow-rumps; and Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus varius*) hide behind their trunks.

It is 6.20 now, and several flocks of Bronzed Grackles are passing over, coming from the marsh in the east and going for the cultivated and wooded region in the west.

From the railing of one of the numerous wooden bridges, which lead out to the bath-houses, 200 yards from shore, a Kingfisher drops upon his finny prey, and a little farther out over a hundred Coots and Grebes are gamboling in the shallow water of the lake.

The song of a Chippy comes from a large yard and a big flock flies up into a tree; they like the company of their own species, always go in flocks and do not mix much with other sparrows.

At the eastern edge of town a bayou joins its murky waters with the lake, and vegetation is luxuriant in its realm. Hoary water tupelos (*Nyssa uniflora*) and long-whiskered cypresses (*Taxodium distichum*) skirt its banks, and cat-tails, pitcher plants and mud-plantains fill its bed. The Winter Wren has here his home, and Swamp Sparrows keep him company. The Phæbe pays them frequent visits. Black and Turkey Vultures are not among the early risers; several of them are still roosting lazily in the tupelos, not more than twenty feet above the ground, in perfect unison, both species on one branch.

Shining far through underbrush and timber the yellow jasmine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*) is seen to rear its fragrant golden flowers on twining stem through bushes high up into trees. The shrub-like red buckeye (*Æsculus pavia*) grows here in clusters and is far advanced. Its leaves are nearly of full size and some of its flower buds are ready to break open; only two days more of warm, sunshiny weather and the first Hummingbird will suck its nectar, as the opening of this flower is the signal for the appearing of this impatient little midge.<sup>1</sup>

Here we leave the lake shore and follow the road through wooded, partly cultivated, land eastward. Reaching the corner of an old worm fence, which encloses a large field, lately ploughed, we stop to jot down a lot of species, some of which we have not yet met to-day. Scattered through the weeds along the fence a gathering of Fringillidæ attracts our first attention. They are mostly Field Sparrows, but there are others, too; there are Song and Swamp Sparrows, Towhees, and White-throated Sparrows. Through the fence rails slips a House Wren in and out, and from a tangle of brambles comes the sharp alarm note of the Cardinal and the *ēoorit* of a Thrasher. Out on the ploughed ground thirty or more small birds are walking, running, jumping, sometimes taking short flights in pursuit of winged insects; they are Pipits, the animators of Louisianian winter scenery. But there are other, larger birds near and among them, also running over the ground and taking short flights; these are Killdeers. While we are still taking in the beauties of the landscape with its varied

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<sup>1</sup> The first Hummer was seen at Mandeville, March 3.

bird life, a noise is heard over our heads, and looking up we are just in time to see a troop of Pine Siskins (*Spinus pinus*) falling into a leafing sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). They came in this tree to rest, but only long enough to see a second troop arrive to take their place. Soon all are off, and we follow their example. A Hermit Thrush, silent and solitary, flies up from the ground and hides behind a tree nearby. Following the road through timber we are struck with its painful silence and are glad to have it broken by the Fish Crows from the lake shore not far off.

Soon we come to another, larger bayou, crossed by a bridge, on which we stop to admire the exquisite scenery. A picturesque cypress, draped with streaming moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) and its free upper branches softly clothed with newly produced green. This stately cypress in the center is flanked with tupelos of only half its height and smothering under a heavy burden of moss. Upon this hoary background stand in bold relief a few red maples (*Acer rubrum drummondii*) filled with brilliant crimson fruit and supported by a base of different shades of green, willows mixed with scarlet-berried hollies, almost to the waters' edge, an inky, green-black, sluggish water, fifty feet in width. In the overflow, on oozy ground, a troop of Rusty Blackbirds searches after food and others are concerting in the tree-tops; the males are uniformly black, the females gray, nothing rusty can be seen about them. A few young Red-winged Blackbirds, males and females, are among them.

At last we reach the gate of Fontainebleau and behold a vast extent of barren land; weeds and vines, mingled in places with sprouts from stumps, and scattering trees; herds of horses and cattle, and in a distance of almost a mile a few low, uninteresting buildings. The transformation of a first-rate sugar plantation into a third-rate stock farm has left no trace of its former splendor.

The foundation of the mansion, in which Audubon first saw the light of day, is still there, but the walls have crumbled into a heap of bricks, which fill the cellar. The whole is overgrown with rank vegetation, crowned by trees rooted in the ruin.

From the large sugarcane house, which has two chimneys and some of the walls still standing, a broad avenue leads straight down to the

former landing place on the lake. This avenue is shaded by two rows of immense live-oaks, twelve on each side. Between every two trees and in a line with their trunks there stood at Audubon's time a cabin for two families having one big chimney in common; one of these chimneys is still standing, but all others are only a heap of disintegrating bricks, showing the transitoriness of all earthly things. Man's handiwork is all changed, but Nature's grandeur is the same; the trees, the lake, and the waves that strike its shore; the Mocker sings as cheerfully as it did then, and the Vultures soar as dreamily as of old.

While coming through the wild pasture land we noticed but few birds. Several Song Sparrows emerged from their recesses, looked with astonishment at the intruder, and disappeared. A small troop of Grass Finches (*Poocetes gramineus*) was surprised, feeding in the road, and a number of Flickers started from the ground. A Sparrow Hawk kept moving from tree to tree, and the wandering voices of Goldfinches and Purple Finches were in the air. Of especial interest was the meeting with a troop of Common Crows (*Corvus americanus*), which are not abundant so far south, at least not at this date. Scattered over the cheerless waste were several Mockingbirds and Shrikes, all earnestly engaged in the pursuit of game. Perched on the top of a stout weed and in a hawk-like attitude, scrutinizing the surrounding ground, they resemble each other very much. Both whip their tail, and both spring upon their prey in the identical manner, and also in their musical reveries the listener is struck with a strange semblance.

After 9 A. M. the sun is pretty warm on the Gulf Coast, even on the first of March, and when the Pine Warbler's song reaches our ear from the adjacent woods, we can not resist the temptation to invade the privacy of its domain. Before we enter the woods we cast another look upon the scene we leave: a scene of dreary desolation, whose gloom neither the sun's rays nor the arrival of a hungry drove of White-bellied Swallows can dispel. And to complete the dismal picture a number of Turkey Vultures are drawing ominous circles through the blue above. While the woods in the watery region near the lake are bare deciduous trees of many kinds, those farther back on drier soil are made up chiefly

of the long-leaved pine (*Pinus australis*) with an undergrowth of palmetto, young pines and blackberry bushes. These pines are hung with moss, but much less so than the trees on damper ground. Our Pine Warbler has been singing all the while its simple ditty at the rate of once every ten seconds. It is one of those vexatious songs, which tax our patience not a little. Sometimes you think it comes from nearby on the ground, when really the bird is way off in a tree-top. He is the only songster in these woods at present, and with him census-taking is an easy task, resulting in the sweeping annotation: A common and industrious songster in the pine woods. Besides his song he has various calls, one of which recalls the twittering of Swifts.

Often when we are trying to discover the indefatigable musician, or when we follow his flycatching antics in the outer branches, we notice scales of bark dropping from on high beside a tree. This is the work of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Dryobates borealis*); the pineries are his home and, though he makes but little noise and hugs seclusion on the off-side of the trunk, the flying chips of bark betray his whereabouts. But to-day the Red-cockaded are not silent; they chirp and chase and quarrel and frolic and, when they light against a tree, they make the bark fly with a vim, as if putting all their mirth and passion in that bill, emitting all the time a note which reminds one strongly of a Robin's.

The Pine Warbler, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and the Brown-headed Nuthatch form a triumvirate group, truly characteristic of these piny woods. When you see one, you will soon hear or see the other. The first of March is mating time with all of them, the most favorable days for observation. At other times an inconspicuous little midge, the Nuthatch draws to-day as much attention as the other members of the coalition. What he lacks in size, he makes up in restlessness and noise. With squeaking notes they chase each other through the woods, or measure trees by nervous hops out to the farthest end; a violent emotion sways their diminutive bodies and allows them to rest only long enough to emit a little song, a few really musical notes, the last of which recalls one of the Goldfinch's. Thus they follow each other from branch to branch, from tree to tree, until at last the impetuous knight carries his prize, and peace ensues once more in these

usually silent woods. They are not void of bird life, but the resident birds, if not excited, are not loud, and the winter guests from northern lands are naturally very quiet among strangers in the fremd.

Soft *peos* of the Tufted Tit are heard sometimes, but the species does not seem to be so loud as farther north. Its cousin and companion, the Carolina Chickadee, is also heard from time to time, but the Woodpeckers, the Downy, the Hairy, and the Red-bellied, do not say much, while the Sapsucker says still less. With the exception of the Flicker, the Sapsucker is the most numerous of its tribe, and you are just as likely to find him with the Kinglets and Yellow-rumps in the magnolia of your garden, or with the Robins and Cedar-birds in the hollies at the bayou, as in the deep pine woods. Rather surprising at first is the presence of a bevy of Bobwhites and a troop of Meadowlarks in the pine woods, but they appear to feel themselves as much at home there as the Flicker in the marsh or meadow.

The bird fauna generally is quite varied in Louisiana at the first of March, though migration from the south has not yet set in. Of the species which regularly leave the State in winter only the Martin has returned, but migration begins soon after and becomes brisk by the middle of the month.

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## A STUDY OF THE GENUS *MACRORHAMPHUS*.

BY REGINALD HEBER HOWE, JR.

EVER since Thomas Bell and George N. Lawrence in 1852, in the 'Annals' of the New York Lyceum of Natural History (Vol. V, pp. 1-5), recognized that long- and short-billed forms of this genus existed, ornithologists have either been loath (Coues, Birds of the Northwest, p. 477) to accept the two forms, or have been puzzled to identify many specimens in the collections.

A month or two ago while examining some fifteen specimens of this genus in search of a male Long-billed Dowitcher, the fact of